



## BUILDING INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES *on Main Street*

An inclusive community is one that celebrates diversity and is committed to equity and equal opportunity. Main Street America programs have an important role to play in building inclusive communities, and are in a prime position to ensure all stakeholders have a seat at the table.





By Norma Ramirez de Miess and Hannah White

**By now, you've probably seen references to the numerous studies and reports documenting the demographic changes underway in the United States—and you've most likely witnessed these changes for yourself in your own community. The numbers are clear: our country is diverse, and becoming more so.**

According to data from the U.S. Census Bureau, 37 percent of the population identifies as being part of a minority group (non-Caucasian), with the Hispanic population becoming the largest, fastest-growing minority group. By 2050 (or even before, depending on which study you reference), the United States is expected to become a majority-minority nation.

These changes have big implications for rural communities and big cities alike, and we in the commercial district revitalization field have an important role to play. As a network of grassroots community advocates, how can we better build and support a welcoming and inclusive environment for our diverse residents and business owners, and how do we engage them in making our downtowns stronger in the future?

### THE CASE FOR MAIN STREET

While some areas are expected to experience more rapid change than others, what's clear is that the size and scope of these transformations will continue to affect the

cultural, social, and economic fabric of our communities. The Main Street Approach—with its community-led, comprehensive focus—is well-suited to help leaders directly engage with these opportunities, and in fact, building inclusive communities is part of the DNA of everything we do. As community anchors, Main Street organizations are in a prime position to serve as catalysts for fostering a culture of active engagement from all sectors in the community. Given the increasingly diverse communities of all sizes across the country, downtown organizations must work to ensure that all voices are included, valued, and invited to participate in the revitalization work, and also leverage this engagement to develop strong leaders for the communities they serve.

We do this not only because it's the right thing to do, but because it creates better outcomes for everyone. For instance, the outsized impact that minority and immigrant owned enterprises have on local economies is well docu-

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communities across the nation assess organizational and programming needs and implement strategies that build successful revitalization efforts. With more than 20 years of leadership experience, she developed NMSC's diversity services and leads initiatives that promote inclusion and understanding of the business approach of multi-cultural entrepreneurs. Before joining the Center, Norma led one of the largest and most diverse urban downtown revitalization programs in Elgin, Illinois, and was recognized as one of the 25 Most Influential Latino Leaders in the Chicago area.

As Director of

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oversees a diverse portfolio which includes maintaining and growing the National Main Street Center's membership base, developing and administering member-related benefits and programs, curriculum development for the Main Streets Now Conference and online trainings, and providing support and direction for other special initiatives at the Center. Prior to NMSC, Hannah worked in the Public Policy department at Chicago-based Donors Forum. She graduated with a BA in History from Earlham College and has a Masters in Social Sciences from the University of Chicago.

mented. According to a recent study from the Fiscal Policy Institute, immigrants now own more than 18 percent of all incorporated businesses in the United States, and this share is growing. Immigrants started 28 percent of all new U.S. businesses in 2011, despite accounting for just 12.9 percent of the U.S. population, and according to a report from The Partnership for a New American Economy, these largely tend to be small Main Street-type businesses. And as Main Streeters know, the presence of a strong and dynamic local business scene has a ripple effect in a community. Beyond the pure economic impact, these enterprises and entrepreneurs help to make our communities more unique, interesting, and attractive places to live, work, and play.

While Main Street is well-positioned to help leverage these assets and build more inclusive communities, the path is not always easy. Challenges, both real and perceived, can prevent organizations from involving diverse stakeholders. Sometimes organizations, especially ones with limited capacity and resources, simply don't feel they have the time or bandwidth to make focusing on inclusion a priority. As a result, they continue holding meetings and events in the same places, inviting the same people to the table, and engaging with the same stakeholders. Other times, there is a hesitancy to reach out to

groups who speak a different language, do business differently, or approach community challenges in a different way. These perceived hurdles may seem too big for a downtown revitalization organization to handle.

But, it is possible for communities of all sizes to take on this work successfully, and become stronger and more economically vibrant as a result. It can help to think about this process using three key principles: first, understand what is shared among people in the district; then, recognize the differences; and finally, build bridges.

### **BUILDING COMMUNITY OWNERSHIP THROUGH COMMON GROUNDS**

Take Milford, Delaware, as an example. This town of approximately 10,000 residents has a very diverse population, with a break-down of about 65 percent White, 22 percent African American, and 16 percent Latino. And, with an increasing number of new immigrants from Haiti and Central America, Milford is poised to become even more diverse in the years to come. Delaware's Downtown Economic Development Office, which houses the State Main Street program, and Downtown Milford, Inc. (DMI), which joined the Delaware Main Street program in 2008 and received National Accreditation from the National Main Street Center in 2009, both recognized the need to proac-

tively engage these existing and new populations in the downtown economy and cultivate a sense of community ownership. They received a Technical Assistance Grant from the National Main Street Center and together, provided the foundation to dedicate resources to these efforts, recruiting a highly competent Americorps VISTA coordinator, Noa Kornbluh, who was tasked with carrying out the diversity and inclusion initiative.

DMI leadership knew that more fully incorporating diverse voices in downtown revitalization would take thoughtful, deliberate work. Diane Laird, the State Coordinator in Delaware, credits DMI's board of directors for "recognizing the need to build a more diverse organization...and then deliberately doing so through board engagement, committee/project work, and implementation...as several pockets of the community had not naturally become involved in Main Street." Thus, the diversity initiative in Milford started with dialogue. Instead of jumping right into a project or plan, DMI began with a community-wide conversation that included surveys, direct interviews and visits with local business owners, and discussions with local partner organizations. Several key activities came out of those conversations, including an International Food Festival, a more diverse downtown merchant's organization, and a colorful community-driven mural.



The 24 ft.-by-12 ft. mural was installed on the outside of a downtown restaurant. The mural features landmarks that have long defined Milford’s community character—the Mspillion River and the local water tower—as well as images that celebrate Milford’s new diverse populations, including music and dancers from different cultural backgrounds. The title of the mural, “We Are Milford,” was first a hashtag used to identify community events on social media. In the past, this hashtag had been the subject of criticism for its use at events that were not perceived as inclusive. By using it again in this deliberate way as part of a community-driven process, the mural sought to address those perceptions head on, and signal a turning point in the community dialogue.

“We Are Milford” mural

Photo: Gervasio Ruiz

Ultimately, the mural is much more than simply an art project or a run of the mill promotions project aimed at beautifying downtown. The process of engaging residents, students, business owners, and partner organizations helped to build a broader sense of community ownership, and importantly, it was centered on the participation of parts of the population who had never been involved in Main Street activities before. According to Noa Kornbluh, the project was a critical activity for the organization. “Working together on the mural every week for eight months created the opportunity to get to know one another, exchange ideas and build community.” The mural provided a perfect vehicle through which to broaden Main Street’s reach, spark an important

Students Jasmine Castaneda and Esther Lee work with artist DeMarcus Shelborne.

Photo: Noa Kornbluh



and ongoing dialogue, and ensure the future of downtown is one that embraces and celebrates the diversity of the whole community.

### BALANCING COMPETING PRESSURES IN A NEIGHBORHOOD IN TRANSITION

The Shaw district of Washington, D.C.—one of 2016’s Great American Main Street Award winners—has a very different profile, history, and local economy, but it too has taken on the role of community anchor, bringing together diverse populations and forging partnerships to ensure that new development that is sweeping D.C. does not displace or discount the needs of long-time residents. The Shaw district has a long and storied past as an African American enclave, dating back to when the area was home to a number of freed former slaves that were housed in Union Army camps nearby. Over the course of the twentieth century, Shaw became a thriving center for African American business and culture, rivaling the energy and creative output of New York’s Harlem.

However, like many urban neighborhoods, the area experienced a downturn beginning in the 1950s, exacerbated by riots in the late 60s, and urban renewal later in the century that resulted in empty storefronts, disinvestment, and less economic opportunity for local residents. In 1997, seeking a “big fix” to boost reinvestment, the District of Columbia began construction of a new convention center at the south end of the Shaw district. By some measures that effort was successful. The center spanned five city blocks, and over the course of a number of years, spurred a 300 percent increase in property tax assessments. While increased property tax assessments, in addition to the accompanying rising

home values and increased foot traffic in the district, signaled renewed economic activity, many long-term residents feared that this new investment—which was perceived to be aimed at bringing in new, high-earning populations—would drive out long-term residents.

When Shaw Main Streets formed in 2003, it entered this complicated landscape head-on—balancing the opportunity that accompanies a hot real estate market with the needs, rights, and contributions of long-time local residents. Under the leadership of Alex Padro, Shaw Main Streets has actively involved the multicultural community and the results are truly impressive. Since its founding, the organization has helped to usher in a vibrant tech and arts scene, added 1,200 new units of housing (with another 2,000 on the way), guided sensible new development while retaining local character, and reduced the retail vacancy rate from 20 percent to 1 percent. Of the 170 new neighborhood businesses, many were started by, or serve and employ

City Market at O development, located in the heart of Shaw, incorporates a public market building built in 1881.

Photo: Alexander M. Padro, courtesy Shaw Main Streets



“Maintaining the neighborhood’s economic diversity by preserving affordable housing has been an important part of keeping our promises to the community. We’ve brought billions of dollars in new commercial and residential development to the neighborhood, but we’ve also made sure that the folks who were here during the down times have been able to stay and enjoy the boom times...Keeping our community diverse is important to our neighbors, and volunteers, regardless of race, ethnicity, or economic status.” **Alexander M. Padro, Executive Director, Shaw Main Streets**

existing residents. And importantly, all of this has been accomplished with no net loss of residents of affordable units.

None of this happened by accident. Cristina Amoruso, who works closely with Shaw Main Streets as the DC Main Streets Coordinator, says, “The organization always understood that there was value in them anticipating change and working through whatever this change brought. They made it their business to be flexible, to come up with creative solutions, and to be proactive.” She emphasizes that the organization has always seen its role broadly, and attributes their success to “forging strong partnerships, and acting on behalf of the collective ‘we’ as a vibrant community of residents, business and property owners as opposed to only serving one sector of the population.” Thus, Shaw Main Streets’ role is pivotal in balancing the powers at play, helping to minimize the displacement of low and moderate income residents its service area, while supporting new economic growth that can ensure the district continues to thrive.

### MAKING IT WORK IN YOUR MAIN STREET

While your community may not look like Milford or Shaw, every Main Street program has the opportunity to incorporate inclusion more fully into its work. This process requires us to go beyond the surface and take a closer look at our community’s make up. The process starts with taking a look at who we have and what is missing at the table and identifying the ways and tools to expand our reach and take the first steps. For some of our communities, Main Streets can become catalysts for engaging more youth, Millennials, or aging adults, and integrating their presence in our boards, in our activities, and in the overall downtown revitalization experience. Everyone in the community has a stake in the successful revitalization of their downtown or core commercial district and the Main Street Approach provides a useful framework for local leaders to explore ways to help everyone to discover a place for them in this journey. This also requires more internal assessment and perhaps redefining organizational components that can include more clearly outlined opportunities for people to take an active role in the revitalization process. As we look to the future, there is an imperative for all of us to invest the necessary time and resources in this area so that America’s Main Streets continue to reflect the great diversity this country has to offer.

Public art celebrating the contributions of notable African Americans who lived in Shaw, like “Duke” Ellington, now promote the neighborhood’s rich Black history.

Photo: Alexander M. Padro, courtesy Shaw Main Streets

Wanda Henderson, owner of Wanda’s on 7th, returned after construction to an upgraded retail space instead of being displaced by new development.

Photo: Alexander M. Padro, courtesy Shaw Main Streets

